



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

Fish and Wildlife Service

For Release: January 17, 1992

Patricia Fisher 202-208-5634

FEDERAL WILDLIFE AGENTS CLIP WINGS OF BIRD SMUGGLER

Special agents from the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today arrested an alleged major smuggler of parrots, capping an intensive three-year undercover investigation into the international and highly profitable illicit trade in exotic birds. Spanning several continents, the effort involved law enforcement officials from Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. Concurrently dozens of search warrants were executed in Florida, California, Illinois, New York, Louisiana, and two foreign countries.

The alleged trafficker, a native of New Zealand, was apprehended in Los Angeles while arranging exotic bird sales.

Simultaneously, agents from New Zealand's Customs Service, Department of Conservation, and Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, as well as law enforcement officials from the Australian Customs Service and National Parks and Wildlife agency served warrants. In all, hundreds of live birds were seized as well as large quantities of records.

"The international wildlife trade is estimated at over \$5 billion dollars annually," said U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director John Turner as he announced the end of the covert phase

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of the investigation. "Legal commerce in wildlife is marred by a significant illegal marketing network. In fact, estimates indicate that 25 percent of this trade may be illegal.

"The Fish and Wildlife Service is committed to halting illegal wildlife trade. The time has come to stop this practice which threatens the very survival of these beautiful birds in the wild."

Out of some 330 species of parrots, 23 are listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act. Additionally, trade in all species of parrots except cockatiels and budgerigars (parakeets) is regulated by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). With 112 member nations, including the United States, CITES is the world's most widely accepted conservation agreement.

Many species of parrots are also further protected by the laws of the country in which they are found. In Australia and New Zealand, for example, all commercial export of wild parrots is illegal.

During the investigation, Service special agents documented elaborate schemes designed to disguise the native origins of large quantities of parrots worth millions of dollars. This laundering involved smuggling birds out of many African nations where they are protected and into other African countries where they were given false documentation. These countries then exported them to the United States, the world's largest importer of wild-caught birds.

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The investigation also revealed that rare and valuable native Australian cockatoos were smuggled into New Zealand, falsely documented as captive-bred wildlife, and then exported to the United States and other countries. Various species of Australian cockatoos may command prices of \$10,000 to \$20,000 per bird on the United States market. Agents also encountered a flourishing market in fertile psittacine (parrot) eggs and extensive smuggling between the United States, Australia, and New Zealand.

Illegal commerce in wild-caught birds is enormously profitable. For example, an African grey parrot, the coveted talking bird made famous in literature, film, and on television, sells in the United States for about \$700. Smuggled from the United States, this same bird would have a price tag of \$5,000 in Australia and New Zealand. Breeding pairs command even higher prices.

"The attractive and colorful parrots are highly prized by people who want exotic pets. But, to ensure the health of these species in the wild, we must understand the international ramifications of our decisions and demands as consumers," Turner said.

Further investigations also revealed the existence of an extensive pipeline through which thousands of Amazon parrots are smuggled into the United States annually from Mexico. Also, many other Latin American species of parrots were discovered to have been unlawfully imported into the United States.

The continuing investigation by the Service and several United States Attorney Offices will focus on the well-organized and highly sophisticated network of profiteers documented during the effort. Violations of Federal law being investigated involve: Endangered Species Act, Lacey Act, conspiracy, smuggling, tax evasion, and false statements (see fact sheet for details on penalties associated with these acts).

Prosecutions will be referred to the appropriate United States Attorney Offices, including Miami, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Albany, New York with support from attorneys in the Wildlife and Marine Resources Section of the United States Department of Justice in Washington, D.C.



FISH & WILDLIFE

FWS-069

Facts

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THE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT AND THE LACEY ACT

ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT - (16 USC 1531-1543; 50 CFR 14, 17, and 23). The Endangered Species Act, passed in 1973, is designed to regulate a wide range of activities affecting plants and animals designated as endangered or threatened. The Act prohibits the following activities involving endangered species:

- Import into or export from the United States;
- Take (includes harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, trap, kill, capture, or collect) within the United States and its territorial seas;
- Take on the high seas;
- Possess, sell, deliver, carry, transport, or ship any such species unlawfully taken within the United States or on the high seas;
- Deliver, receive, carry, transport, or ship in interstate or foreign commerce in the course of a commercial activity;
- Sell or offer for sale in interstate or foreign commerce.

Prohibitions apply to endangered species, their parts, and products. Most of these restrictions also apply to species listed as threatened unless the species qualifies for an exception. The Act also requires that wildlife be imported or exported through designated ports and that special declarations are filed. Importers and exporters must be licensed if the value of wildlife imported and/or exported is \$25,000 per year or more.

Exceptions - Permits may be granted for scientific or propagation purposes or for economic hardship

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For further information, contact:

Division of Law Enforcement
Fish and Wildlife Service
U.S. Dept. of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

(703)358-1949

Please refer to FWS-025 when making inquiries

situations involving endangered or threatened species.

Penalties - Violators of the Endangered Species Act are subject to fines of up to \$100,000 and one year's imprisonment. Organizations found in violation may be fined up to \$200,000. Fish, wildlife, plants, and vehicles and equipment used in violations may be subject to forfeiture.

Rewards - Individuals providing information leading to a civil penalty or criminal conviction may be eligible for cash rewards.

LACEY ACT - (16 USC 3371-3378 and 18 USC 42; 50 CFR 14 and 16). Passed in 1900, the Lacey Act prohibits import, export, transportation, sale, receipt, acquisition, or purchase of fish, wildlife or plants which are taken, possessed, transported or sold in violation of any Federal, State, tribal or foreign law. Amendments made in 1981 were designed to strengthen Federal laws and improve Federal assistance to States and foreign governments in enforcement of fish and wildlife laws. The Act has become a vital tool in efforts to control smuggling and trade in illegally taken fish and wildlife. Another aspect of the Lacey Act regulates the transportation of live wildlife, requiring that animals be transported into the United States under humane and healthful conditions. The Act also allows the Interior Secretary to designate those wildlife species considered injurious to humans and prohibit their importation into the country.

Penalties - Individuals convicted of violating the Lacey Act may be sentenced up to \$100,000 and 1 year in jail for misdemeanors and up to \$250,000 and five years' imprisonment for felony violations. Fines for organizations in violation of the Act are up to \$250,000 and \$500,000, for misdemeanor and felony violations respectively. In addition, vehicles, aircraft, and equipment used in the violation as well as illegal fish, wildlife, and plants may be subject of forfeiture.

Rewards - Persons who provide information on violations of the Lacey Act may be eligible for cash rewards.